The Political Middlebrow from Chesterton to Orwell

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In the first chapter of his 1936 novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, George Orwell offered what was probably his earliest extended contribution to the battle of the brows that had been raging in the periodical press and on the airwaves for more than a decade. The "middlebrow" was not mentioned even once, but it was indisputably present: an implied though unnamed category that the book's intentionally exasperating protagonist -- an autobiographical caricature of Orwell himself – dismisses alongside both the "high" and the "low." In the introductory description, the narrator underlines the fact that Gordon Comstock, an aspiring writer earning his keep as a bookshop assistant, has "What people call a 'good' forehead -- high, that is" (Orwell, 1936, p. 4). But his lack of capital – literal, rather than cultural – prevents him from fitting comfortably into his natural niche. As Gordon surveys the bookshelves in the shop, his eyes gravitate to

> the contemporary stuff. Priestley's latest. Dinky little books of reprinted 'middles'. Cheer-up 'humour' from Herbert and Knox and Milne. Some highbrow stuff as well. A novel or two by Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Smart pseudo-Strachey predigested biographies. Snooty, refined books on safe painters and safe poets by those moneyed young beasts who glide so gracefully from Eton to Cambridge and from Cambridge to the literary reviews. (p. 7)

The savvy reader recognises at once the stock representatives of the middlebrow (Priestley's fiction; reprinted essay collections, probably by the likes of Lynd and Chesterton[i]) and also their Bloomsbury opposite numbers. Neither is given much of a chance. As customers drift into the shop, satiric classification along the brow spectrum gathers force. There is a "moneyed 'artistic' young" homosexual interested in "expensive book[s] on the Russian ballet" and "translations from the Bulgarian" (p. 12-3), and a young woman "assistant at a chemist's shop" looking for a "good hot-stuff love story": "'Modern, but not Deep,' said Gordon, as lowbrow to lowbrow" (p. 17-8).

The most fascinating insight into the dynamics of the brows, though, operating simultaneously at several levels of irony, comes with the entrance of two customers for the subscription library: both women, one "lower-class," the other "middle-middle class, carrying under her arm a copy of *The Forsyte Saga* -- title outwards, so that passers-by could spot her for a highbrow" (p. 9). She is no such thing, needless to say: the cultural gulf that separates her from the highbrow -- signalled as much by that one book title as by her flaunting of her supposed accomplishment in reading it -- can no more be bridged than the class and gender divide that separates her from the young beasts of Cambridge. But Mrs. Penn is oblivious to her absurdity, and the reader is meant to spot the narrator's irony and snigger complicitly at her middlebrow pretension. He would not be the only one congratulating himself on his cultural superiority, however, for as the lower-class Mrs. Weaver drops her copy of "Ethel M. Dell's *Silver Wedding*," Mrs. Penn "smile[s] up to Gordon, archly, as highbrow to highbrow. Dell! The lowness of it! The books these lower classes read!" (p. 9). Gordon plays along, and so does the narrator, emphasising at every opportunity Mrs. Penn's pathetic assumption of highbrow solidarity with Gordon. But her literary judgements inevitably give her away, and the comic interchange which follows is intended to provoke a laugh at the expense of Mrs. Penn's pretensions. As Mrs. Weaver mumbles unselfconsciously in her Cockney accent about Burroughs and Deeping, Mrs. Penn carefully prepares to enact her highbrow role, unaware that the middlebrow platitudes she utters seem as derisory to Gordon and the reader as Mrs. Weaver's preferences do to her.

A spasm passed over Mrs Penn's face at the mention of Burroughs. She turned her back markedly on Mrs Weaver.
'What I feel, Mr Comstock, is that there's something so *big* about Galsworthy. He's so broad, so universal, and yet at the same time so thoroughly English in spirit, so *human*. His books are real *human* documents.'
'And Priestley, too,' said Gordon. 'I think Priestley's such an awfully fine writer, don't you?'
'Oh, he is! So big, so broad, so human! And so essentially English!' (p. 10)

Just as Mrs. Penn mocks the lowbrow tastes of Mrs. Weaver – Dell is "certainly astonishingly popular,' said Gordon, diplomatically, his eye on Mrs Penn. 'Oh, as*ton*ishingly!' echoed Mrs

Penn, ironically, her eye on Gordon" -- so does the narrator mock the middlebrow woman reader and, by implication, the authors she enjoys, the notorious "broadbrows": Galsworthy, Priestley, and Walpole, who also turns out to be "*big*," "human," and "so essentially English" (p. 11).

But who are these authors? Theirs are not the names that have come to be identified with the "feminine middlebrow" in recent criticism, though Mrs. Penn fits the stereotype of the feminine middlebrow reader to a tee. They hail, on the contrary, from the male middlebrow canon -- not because of their own gender identity, or because their readership was exclusively male (they were consumed extensively by women), but because of the gender-coded associations their writing aroused -- "big human documents" indeed, dealing with the major social issues of the time.[ii] Galsworthy and Priestley in particular were "serious writers with a message" -- hence Mrs. Penn's mistaken assumption that reading them makes her a highbrow (qtd. in Baxendale, 2007, p. 5). It was Galsworthy and Priestley, rather than the female writers explored by critics such as Alison Light and Nicola Humble, who were Virginia Woolf's acknowledged adversaries. Though Priestley did not make an appearance in her essay "Character in Fiction," it was as true of his books as it was of Galsworthy's that "In order to complete them it seem[ed] necessary to do something — to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque" (Woolf, 2008, p. 44). Not all middlebrow writing took in social criticism within its purview: what I shall call the political middlebrow was but one subspecies,[iii] but a subspecies that loomed large in its opponents' imagination, and one whose genealogy could be traced straight back to the Edwardian period.

In "Character in Fiction" Woolf paired Galsworthy with H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett: authors still frustratingly popular and influential in the 1920s and 30s, but whose reputations had been made in the 1900s, and who had already been attacked in similar terms by Henry James long before the middlebrow emerged as a recognisable concept.[iv] The

notorious argument between James and Wells on the purpose of the novel, which Woolf chose to replay in her own series of essays,[v] had been the product of a different cultural context, and avoided many of the clichés which characterised the typical brows exchange of the interwar years, but it did make the political charge of what would later be referred to as "middlebrow" explicit. Wells made it clear that he preferred to be called a journalist rather than an artist (Edel and Ray, 1958, p. 264) because he wanted to discuss "the problems which are being raised in such bristling multitude by our contemporary social development" (p. 148), to critise "laws and institutions … social dogmas and ideas" (p. 154), to influence conduct -- to write, in other words, in a political register. In his autobiography he even claimed that the "propaganda novel" was the closest "approximation" to the kind of novel he was advocating, though the views he "thrust" upon his readers were his own, and not "confined to the definite service of some organised party…" (p. 224).

The same could be said of his other contemporaries who would come to be retrospectively labelled middlebrow by the younger generation. There is no doubt that when writers of the 1920s and 30s as different as Woolf and Huxley looked down with disdain on their Edwardian predecessors, the Edwardians' political commitments damned them as surely as their representational aesthetic. The big names of the 1900s -- Shaw, Wells, Chesterton, Kipling -- for all their wildly differing ideologies, had one thing in common: they were polemicists, writers with a purpose -- often journalists, always public moralists. They tried to convince and persuade their audiences, they had programmes, they wrote propaganda -- whether socialist, Christian, or imperialist is a secondary matter -- and their programmes did not have an exclusively artistic import, but a social, supra-literary one. This approach to writing (fiction, non-fiction, drama, or poetry) had deep roots in the Victorian period, and it persisted long into the twentieth century, but its Edwardian incarnation had the unfortunate distinction of furnishing a favourite straw man for subsequent highbrow critiques. By the end

of Edward the VII's reign, despite their socialist oppositional credentials, Wells and Shaw were firmly planted as members of the cultural establishment -- and ideologically much more elitist than democratic ones at that -- but none of this mattered when it came to the battle of the brows. As writers, they could never be considered anything else than middling, and though at the opposite pole from Chesterton or Kipling politically, in terms of popular appeal and proselytising intent they could safely be lumped together. As John Gross has argued, "However critical of the established order, men like Shaw and Wells, Bennett and Chesterton put their trust in a popular audience; they might promulgate minority opinions, but not the idea of a minority culture"; they were "preachers, debaters, entertainers" (1969, p. 211). It was not just what they said, but how they said it, where (the *Illustrated London News* or the *London Mercury* rather than the *Criterion*), and to whom, that branded them and banished them from the highbrow literary canon as surely as their successors like Priestley and Orwell.

For here lay the greatest irony of all: Orwell, for all his sniggering at the expense of Priestley and Co., was clearly a political middlebrow writer in just the same vein. When Priestley said of himself: "I have certain quite strong political convictions, and I tend more and more to bring them into my writing" (qtd. in Baxendale, 2007, p. 63), he may as well have been speaking of Orwell. Both men were democratic socialists distrustful of top-down state imposition and mass Americanisation, both wrote realist novels exposing social ills and published famous depression-era documentary travelogues with Victor Gollancz, both turned radical patriot during World War II, promulgating what one could call a "suburban" version of Little Englandism and national character.[vi] Both were populists, appealing not to class but to community, sympathisers with a lowbrow popular as opposed to an elite culture, and therefore inveterate enemies of the rootless highbrow. Both were critical mythologists of the Edwardian age, and had a penchant for the fantastic mode which set them apart from straightforward realists like Bennett. Both, in Priestley's words, "though fiercely radical

politically and socially, [were] culturally … conservative" (qtd. in Baxendale, 2007, p. 26). Both, therefore, represented a very specific strand of the political middlebrow tradition whose greatest Edwardian exponent was G. K. Chesterton.

Few literary figures of the early twentieth century, except Wells himself, contributed as much to the creation of the political middlebrow as Chesterton, whose journalistic and literary career spanned the two Edwardian eras – from "A Defence of Patriotism" published in his first essay collection of 1901 to his *Autobiography*, which appeared in the year of his death 1936. Chesterton's ideas were first formulated in response to the Boer War in papers like *The Speaker* and the *Daily News*, worked out fully in the (original) Edwardian period, and disseminated via articles, essays, poems, popular histories, fantastic and detective fiction during the course of the following three decades. The prolific and controversial G.K.C. pronounced on every topic of interest to the British public -- from Empire, eugenics, and Christianity to the culture of the "common man," the role of the state, and the value of the past. Orwell, with his championing of the "English common man," his baiting of left-wing bohemian "cranks" and "faddists," his romantic anti-capitalism and radical populism, and his use of the press as a pulpit and of speculative fiction as a vehicle for political polemics, successfully transplanted numerous strains of Chesterton's practice and worldview into the post-Edwardian age, though his recognition of the influence was often expressed in decidedly oedipal terms.

Chesterton was born a bit too early to be part of the High Modernist generation; Orwell a bit too late. In 1910, when according to Virginia Woolf human character changed, Orwell was still a child, and Chesterton already had his most famous books behind him. So while the Modernists busied themselves reacting against their Victorian parents and Edwardian older siblings, Orwell was still growing and learning, becoming intimately familiar with Edwardian low and middlebrow literature: from pulp fiction and boys'

magazines to the "good bad books" of Wells, Bennett, Galsworthy, Maugham, and Kipling. His rebellion, when it came, was not directed against the Edwardians in their own decade, but against their persistence in the 1920s and 30s, against the ghost of Edwardianism in the modern world. C. S. Lewis's use of "Edwardian slang" in his popular wartime radio broadcasts, for instance, was contemptible and insulting because it was anachronistic, like the clichés of the Edwardian boys' weeklies still being repeated in 1940 (1944, p. 440).[vii] It was as if the Edwardians had outlived their proper time: writers who were rightly considered progressive before the Great War were merely embarrassing after. What Orwell said of Wells in this regard was typical:

> But is it not a sort of parricide for a person of my age (thirty-eight) to find fault with H. G. Wells? Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells's own creation. How much influence any mere writer has, and especially a "popular" writer whose work takes effect quickly, is questionable, but I doubt whether anyone who was writing books between 1900 and 1920, at any rate in the English language, influenced the young so much. The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed. Only, just the singleness of mind, the one-sided imagination that made him seem like an inspired prophet in the Edwardian age, make him a shallow, inadequate thinker now…. Back in the nineteen-hundreds it was a wonderful experience for a boy to discover H. G. Wells…. Up to 1914 Wells was in the main a true prophet…. The succession of lower-middle-class novels which are his greatest achievement stopped short at the other war and never really began again, and since 1920 he has squandered his talents in slaying paper dragons. (1941, pp. 539-40)

This mixture of admiration and repudiation characterised Orwell's attitude to Chesterton as well, but while he never claimed that Chesterton influenced him as Wells did, Chestertonian themes appear in his work with much greater frequency. The hand of both writers is evident in Orwell's extended eulogy to pre-WWI life – the 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air*. The first half of the book is a lyrical evocation of the Edwardian Golden Afternoon, a lower-middle-class idyll probably indebted to Wells's 1911 tale of a shopkeeper's adventures, *The History of Mr. Polly*, but made all the more poignant by the ever-present consciousness of modernity, of the inevitable disintegration of the local, intensely English community before the encroachment of mass society. This was a concern dear to Chesterton's (not to mention Priestley's) heart, one which dominated his essays and fiction, though what for Chesterton

was a living antagonism had for Orwell, in his more pessimistic moments, become almost a lost cause. As the narrator of *Coming Up for Air* learns, childhood paradise cannot be regained. In a review of Osbert Sitwell's autobiography Orwell admitted that "there can be no more question of restoring the Edwardian age than of reviving Albigensianism" (1948, p. 396).

This was not altogether a bad thing. Orwell's view of the time may have been tinged with stereotypical nostalgia – it was not for nothing that Cyril Connolly called him a "revolutionary in love with 1910" (qtd. in Rodden, 2002, p. 91) -- but it remained at bottom unsentimentally realistic: for all its "golden summer" appeal, it had been a "vulgar" and "grotesque" epoch, "unjust" and "unequal."

> It was the age of Chaliapin and the Russian Ballet, and of the revival in England of a serious interest in music and painting. It was also the age of ragtime and the tango, of the k-nuts in their grey top-hats, of house-boats and hobble skirts, and of a splashing to and fro of wealth such as the world had not seen since the early Roman empire. The Victorian Puritanism had at last broken down, money was pouring in from all directions …. it was meritorious not merely to be rich, but to look rich. Life in London was a ceaseless round of entertainment, on a scale unheard-of before and barely imaginable now …. There was also the life of the country houses, with their platoons of servants …. Of course, if you happened not to belong to the world of champagne and hot-house strawberries, life before 1914 had serious disadvantages. (1948, pp. 396-7)

And it was precisely Chesterton's and Orwell's beloved "underdogs" who did not belong, the small tradesmen as much as the manual workers. The protagonist of *Coming Up for Air* remembers his Edwardian childhood as a perpetual summer, but there is no champagne or strawberries in sight. What *is* being eulogised, as in many of Priestley's novels, is the admittedly parochial and economically disadvantaged, but nevertheless valuable and irreplaceable world of the English lower middle class. What Orwell called "the native decency of the common man" (1940, p. 55), what Chesterton called the "sanities" of the "common people" (1908, p. 190), had their natural home among the petite bourgeoisie of south of England market towns before the Great War.

They had many other homes as well of course: the "heirs of Nelson and Cromwell," Orwell wrote, were to be found "in the fields and the streets, in the factories and in the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back garden" (1941, p. 432). The English genius resided in the souls of Chesterton's poor London Cockneys and Orwell's unemployed northern miners, as much as in Priestley's "Bruddersfordians." But neither Chesterton nor Orwell felt it sufficed merely to paint the virtues of Jack, it was their duty castigate the Giant as well: the English common man had to have his foil, whether Chesterton's cosmopolitan financier or Orwell's Soviet-worshipping unpatriotic intellectual. And with due allowance for the different epochs in which they lived, both Chesterton and Orwell described this foil in remarkably similar terms. The enemies of the common man were many, from aristocrats to industrialists, but one type – the highbrow -- recurred with surprising frequency, and it mattered little in this respect that Orwell and Chesterton occupied opposite sides of the conventional political spectrum. Orwell's famous diatribe against "fruit-juice drinker[s], nudist[s], sandal-wearer[s], sex-maniac[s], Quaker[s], 'Nature Cure' quack[s], pacifist[s], and feminist[s]" in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937, p. 161) may as well have been cribbed from Chesterton's 1908 article "Why I Am Not a Socialist." Although Orwell ramped up the nastiness, he pursued the same rhetorical strategy as Chesterton in identifying himself with the "ordinary working man," and purporting to share his natural revulsion against socialist (read highbrow) ideals, whether expressed in arid Marxist jargon or in eccentric crankiness.[viii] "'Socialism' is pictured as a state of affairs in which our more vocal Socialists would feel thoroughly at home," Orwell wrote (1937, p. 170), but it was precisely the atmosphere of these "Socialist Utopias" that alienated most decent people (Chesterton, 1908, p. 189). The Socialist "ideal" of happiness, Chesterton confirmed, was unattractive to a "healthy" English mind (1908, p. 190). Both authors started out by saying that it was with "inhuman" and by implication un-English social*ists* rather than with social*ism* that their quarrel lay (Orwell,

1937, p. 169). Socialists were interfering "prigs," out of touch with the "the mass of the common people," they had no conception of normal human desires, of the sanctity of privacy, family life, or the pub (Chesterton, 1908, pp. 189-190; Orwell, 1937, p. 164). Decent, healthy, family values vs. prigs, cranks, intellectuals: one recognises here the vocabulary of numerous anti-highbrow diatribes in the daily press, but with Chesterton and Orwell the name-calling always had an unmistakeable political subtext. English people did not want to be controlled by the state, they did not want alien values "imposed on them" from the top down by what Chesterton called "a handful of decorative artists and Oxford dons and journalists and Countesses on the Spree" (1908, p. 190), and Orwell dubbed "the clever ones….the more-water-in-your-beer reformers … all that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking towards the smell of 'progress' like bluebottles to a dead cat" (1937, p. 167, 169). This mixture of middlebrow social conservatism and radical populism stretched even to their conceptions of revolution. Anticipating Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Chesterton asserted that if the English people made a revolution themselves, it would have "all the features which they like and I like; the strong sense of English cosiness … [the] responsibility of a man under his roof. If you [the socialists] make the Revolution it will be marked by all the things that democracy detests and I detest; the talk about the inevitable, the love of statistics, the materialist theory of history, the trivialities of Sociology, and the uproarious folly of Eugenics" (1908, p. 190).

The antagonism went beyond party affiliation, beyond a shared contempt for meddling Fabian technocracy or Marxist theory. Chesterton and Orwell were fighting a culture war on behalf of the so-called democracy against a self-appointed highbrow elite (see Orwell, 1937, p. 152, 198). Sneering at such practices as teetotalism and vegetarianism was an integral part of this project: "Vegetarianism and all pitting of animal against human rights is a silly fad" proclaimed Chesterton (1908, p. 190), and from *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*

in 1904 to *The Flying Inn* in 1914, and in countless essays in between, he made the teetotaller and the vegetarian the butt of his most persistent jokes. The vegetarian "food-crank" who does not eat meat in order to prolong his miserable life is "out of touch with common humanity" intoned Orwell a generation later (1937, p. 162), repeating Chesterton's arguments word for word, all the way down to protestations at the adulteration of beer in pubs. In *Coming Up For Air*, the antithesis of the authentic lower-middle class Edwardian community is the new "arty-looking" upper-middle class suburb of the 1930s, full of "health-food cranks," simple-lifers, nudists, and psychic researchers who intend "to level the working class 'up' … by means of hygiene, fruit-juice, birth-control, poetry, etc." (1939, p. 226; 1937, p. 150). Needless to say, they do not allow pubs. Thirty years earlier Chesterton had already mocked the sandal-wearers, theosophists, 'high thinking and plain living' artistic types who inhabited the Edwardian garden cities and suburbs, and Orwell himself recognised well enough that the turn of the twentieth century was not just a time of traditional working and lower-middle-class virtues, but of avant-garde pretensions, "when Socialism, vegetarianism, New Thought, feminism, homespun garments and the wearing of beads were all vaguely interconnected" (1940, p. 155). In *Coming Up For Air*, therefore, it was less a particular period that he commemorated than a way of life and thought which still persisted among some classes of the realm, and which was still under attack from so-called "progressive" elements as it had been in Chesterton's day. A lot had changed, but certain conflicts of the 1900s were still being played out in the 1930s.

Given this context, it seems hardly surprising that Orwell's first English-language publication, juvenilia aside, appeared in none other than *G. K.'s Weekly*, Chesterton's distributist newspaper, which carried on from Cecil Chesterton's *The New Witness*. Orwell began his journalistic career, it should be remembered, writing in French in French newspapers, but in 1928 his first English-language subject was the press and "Big Business,"

and his treatment of it was very much after Chesterton's own heart. Although Orwell never devoted a full-scale essay to Chesterton, the older man's witticisms and coinages pepper his writing.[ix] There can be no doubt that like the other prominent middlebrow literary figures of the previous generation, Chesterton formed part of Orwell's mental background. In *The English People*, he is invoked as a symbolic Englishman, an individual who "conform[s] to a national pattern … Dr Johnson and G. K. Chesterton are somehow the same kind of person" (1944, pp. 203-4). Elsewhere he is portrayed as a courageous opponent of the Boer War.[x] In 1935, before he came out as a socialist, Orwell could even opine that "what England needed was to follow the kind of policies in Chesterton's *G. K.'s Weekly*" (qtd. in Crick, 1982, p. 270). It is difficult to say precisely which of Chesterton's works Orwell was familiar with, but he certainly knew his treatments of Dickens -- not just the famous book, but the Introductions to the Everyman Edition, which he thought represented Chesterton's best writing (1944, p. 104). And he must have been a habitual reader of *G. K.'s Weekly*: as late as 1944, long after the paper's demise, he misattributed a poem which had appeared in its pages to Chesterton (1944, p. 153). Chesterton's prophetic powers also received commendation: along with Hilaire Belloc in *The Servile State* (which had "remarkable insight"), he had successfully "predicted the disappearance of democracy and private property, and the rise of a slave society which might be called either capitalist or Communist" (1946, p. 270).

It is therefore all the more surprising that despite these signs of filial inheritance, there is not only no hint anywhere that Orwell consciously viewed Chesterton as a precursor or model, but on the contrary, every indication that he regarded him as an ideological opponent. As a "reactionary" Catholic apologist, ineffectually dreaming of a return to medieval peasant proprietorship, glorifying France and Italy, and making scurrilous remarks against the Jews, Chesterton came to symbolise for Orwell – whenever he was not being classed with Dr. Johnson that is -- the antithesis of true Englishness.[xi] This wilful schizophrenia may be put

down to Orwell's own prejudices: Catholics were the historical enemies of England, and Orwell did not hesitate to place his idiosyncratic anti-Catholic bias at the service of the national myth. Chesterton did not actually convert to Catholicism until 1922, but in most of his appearances in Orwell's oeuvre he figures less as an individual writer than a representative type: "the Chestertons *et hoc genus*" (1936, p. 440), the composite "Father Hilaire Chestnut" of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, whose "latest book of R. C. propaganda" sells almost as well as Priestley's middlebrow fiction or Knox's (a Catholic satirist and mystery writer) humour (p. 7). Chesterton, Orwell claims, is part of a "long line of practitioners" of "the silly-clever religious book" (1944, p. 440), the forefather of the "professional Roman Catholic" comic columnist of the *News Chronicle* or the *Daily Express* (Timothy Shy and Beachcomber), whose "general 'line' will be familiar to anyone who has read" him. It consists of the constant denigration of England and Protestantism, the rewriting of "English history," and attacks on "every English institution – tea, cricket, Wordsworth, Charlie Chaplin, kindness to animals, Nelson, Cromwell and what not" (1944, pp. 262-3). Where politics are involved, Mrs. Penn's "so essentially English" ceases to be a pretext for ridicule, and becomes a compliment of the highest order. Though the targets are the same, the middlebrow-baiting narrator of *Aspidistra* is nowhere in sight, for it is ideology rather than culture which is at stake. Whenever Orwell reviews a Catholic author negatively (which is almost always), a comparison with Chesterton is never far behind.[xii] The "one major objective of young English Catholic writers" -- Waugh and Greene presumably -- may be "not to resemble Chesterton" (1948, p. 405), but it is from him that all the "clever Conservative" litterateurs who assume Catholic superiority, who are against "Government interference of any kind," and who try to laugh the modern world "out of existence," "derive," they are his "followers," and are "influenced by him" (1946, p. 103-4; 1946, p. 101).

Most of these pronouncements date from the 1940s, and Orwell's own early dislike of do-gooder interference -- when his uncanny similarity to Chesterton extended even to matters of hygiene[xiii] -- is conveniently forgotten. But though he let religious bigotry cloud his judgement, Orwell still sensed an underlying kinship with his Edwardian predecessor: "From either a literary or a political point of view," he admitted, contemporary Catholic journalists "are simply the leavings on Chesterton's plate. Chesterton's vision of life was false in some ways, and he was hampered by enormous ignorance, but at least he had courage. He was ready to attack the rich and powerful, and he damaged his career by doing so" (1944, p. 263). Though misguided ideologically, in other words, Chesterton's social commitment was worthy of admiration. In his most extended consideration of the older writer's outlook -- the seminal "Notes on Nationalism" essay -- Orwell again attempted a balanced assessment. And as with his appraisal of Wells, he could not hide his belief that it was all downhill for G. K. C. after the Edwardian high point. "Ten or twenty years ago," Orwell wrote in 1945, referring precisely to the period – the mid-twenties to the mid-thirties -- when his views were being formed by the reading of *G. K.'s Weekly*,

> the form of nationalism most closely corresponding to Communism today was political Catholicism. Its most outstanding exponent … was G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton was a writer of considerable talent who chose to suppress both his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda. During the last twenty years or so of his life, his entire output was in reality an endless repetition of the same thing…. Every book that he wrote, every scrap of dialogue, had to demonstrate beyond the possibility of mistake the superiority of the Catholic over the Protestant or the pagan …. The interesting thing is that had the romantic rubbish which he habitually wrote about France and the French army been written by somebody else about Britain and the British army, he would have been the first to jeer. In home politics he was a Little Englander, a true hater of jingoism and imperialism, and according to his lights a true friend of democracy. Yet when he looked outwards into the international field, he could forsake his principles without even noticing he was doing so. Thus, his almost mystical belief in the virtues of democracy did not prevent him from admiring Mussolini. Mussolini had destroyed the representative government and the freedom of the press for which Chesterton had struggled so hard at home, but Mussolini was an Italian and had made Italy strong, and that settled the matter. Nor did Chesterton ever find a word to say about imperialism and the conquest of coloured races when they were practised by Italians or Frenchmen. His hold on reality, his literary taste, and even to some extent his moral sense, were dislocated as soon as his nationalistic loyalties were involved…. (pp. 144-5)

Orwell did not say it, but it was well known that Chesterton's strongly pro-Catholic, pro-Latin biases, attributed by many to Belloc's influence, were, like Distributism, a feature of his

later writing. Before 1911, general Christian apologetics aside, he was associated mainly with liberal Little Englandism and anti-imperialism, with criticism of Big Business, corrupt government, and cultural decadence: all virtues in Orwell's eyes. If only Chesterton had remained in the Edwardian age, Orwell could have made common cause with him in the name of the English common man and against the highbrow intellectual. But like Wells, Chesterton had outlived his time, and in the new reality of the interwar world he had lost his bearings and had to be repudiated – not because he was middlebrow but because his politics had taken a wrong turning. Orwell, like Wells and unlike Woolf, saw nothing wrong with "propaganda" as such (though he did aspire to "make political writing into an art" (1946, p. 319)), but he reserved the right to critique propaganda which was inimical to his own beliefs.[xiv] As a rationale for breaking with the writers of the 1900s, this was worlds away from the stereotypical highbrow's principled aversion to any kind of populist social commentary.

But in the end it matters little whether Orwell dismissed predecessors like Chesterton and contemporaries like Priestley or embraced them. The views they held in common cannot be wished away, and though their fears and aspirations were not shared by every middlebrow reader, they do remain as faithful expressions of an instantly recognisable cultural formation. The "middlebrow" in this context describes not so much a kind of readership or taste, but a mode of writing: a mode whose marriage of art and politics was, ironically enough, more akin to the concerns of various Continental avant-gardes than was English Modernism itself. And it was a mode which throve remarkably well when transplanted to national soils where the "brow" framework had never taken root. Virginia Woolf's enemies were popular not just in England, but also (despite, or perhaps because of their "essential Englishness") in countries such as the Soviet Union, where their politically engaged but formally conservative style ensured a glowing reception untarnished by any anti-middlebrow snobbery. While

Modernists like Woolf and Joyce remained largely untranslated and therefore unread for many decades (though not always for lack of trying), the likes of Wells, Shaw, Galsworthy, Priestley, Cronin, Chesterton, and even Orwell were embraced by the Soviet common reader, whether in official translations (as with the authorised Galsworthy) or in precious *samizdat* versions (as with the censored Orwell). Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* actually premiered in Moscow in 1945, and Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* was staged there as early as 1923, complete with a Constructivist set. Mrs. Penn, with her talk of the "universal" and the "human," must have been right: the English political middlebrow travelled better than either its high or low counterparts.

Endnotes

[i] See Caroline Pollentier's chapter in this book.

[ii] I owe this formulation to John Baxendale.

[iii] Just like the political highbrow identified by Leonard Woolf (see Collini, 2006, ch. 5).

[iv] See Edel and Ray, 1958. For a discussion of the emergence of the familiar triad "Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy" in the context of the 1920s attack on Edwardianism see the Appendix to Bellamy, 1971.

[v] Some of which appeared in the same organ as James's "The Younger Generation" – the *Times Literary Supplement* -- though Woolf's should have been titled the Older Generation. See Hynes, 1972, although treatments of this topic are legion, and no consideration of the Modernist "Great Divide" can dispense with it.

[vi] Orwell and Englishness is a huge topic, for an introduction see Clarke, 2006 and all his secondary sources. For Priestley see Baxendale, 2007 and (for the opposite view) Waters, 1994.

[vii] See Orwell's "Boys' Weeklies" (1940) in *CW* 12: 57-79.

[viii] What the workers themselves thought of their middlebrow defenders was not always very flattering: on the uneasy relationship between the working-class intellectual and the middlebrow see Hilliard, 2005.

[ix] E.g. "good bad books," "my mother drunk or sober."

[x] See Orwell, "As I Please," 4 (1940) in *CW* 16: 36.

[xi] See, among others, *The Road to Wigan Pier* Diary (*CW* 10: 440); Review of *Zest for Life* (*CW* 10: 508); "Inside the Whale" (*CW* 12: 91); "As I Please," 11 (*CW* 16: 92) (on anti-Semitism); "Anti-Semitism in Britain" (*CW* 17: 68); Review of *The Democrat at the Supper Table* (*CW* 18: 101-2); "Charles Dickens" (*CW* 12: 20-57).

[xii] See Review of *The Democrat at the Supper Table.* Although the Catholic apologists, because they have "a serious purpose," make "the best comic writers" ("Funny, But Not Vulgar" in *CW* 16: 483).

[xiii] E.g. see *The Road to Wigan Pier* (*CW* 5: ch. 12).

[xiv] See Wollaeger, 2006 for a comparative perspective on Orwell's and Woolf's relation to propaganda.

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